







B. upr. Wilson 28/5/36



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THE LAYS AND LAMENTS

OF

THE GAEL.

[Having been applied to for information respecting the old poetry and music of the Highlands of Scotland, we made known our wishes to an eminent Celtic scholar and antiquary, the Rev. Alexander MacGregor, of the Established Church, Edinburgh, and have received in reply the following interesting communication.—*Ed.S.P.*

TO THE EDITOR OF THE SCOTTISH PRESS.

Kilmuir House, Grange, Edinburgh; 4th Nov. 1852.

MY DEAR SIR,—In reply to your note making some inquiries of me about "Piobaireachd," or the Highland bagpipe music, I beg leave to make the following brief and hurried statements, hoping that they may contain such information as may satisfy your friend :—

The music of the great Highland bagpipe may be said to be of three kinds, viz., Salutes, Laments, and Gatherings. Every chieftain or feudal laird had his Salute, or "Failtie;" being a spirited "Piobaireachd" by which his presence was welcomed. As "Failtie Fir Bhaoisdail"—"Boisdale's Salute;" "Failte Mhic Dhonnail"—"M'Donald's Salute," &c. The celebrated "Piobaireachd" "Failte Phrionnsa"—"The Prince's Salute," was composed by John M'Intyre, Rannoch, piper to Menzies of that ilk, on the arrival of his Royal Highness James Prince of Wales in Britain in the year 1715.

Laments, on the other hand, were pieces of music played at funerals, as well as in memory of departed heroes and chieftains. They were called the "Cumhadh," or the "Corranach," as "Cumhadh Ruairidh Mhoir"—"Rory Mor's Lament." It frequently happened that the "Corranach" consisted of poetry set to music, and sung as a panegyric on the deceased, setting forth his worth and warlike achievements. Until about thirty years back, every funeral procession in Skye, and in the adjacent Isles, was attended by one or more pipers, who played a Lament suitable for the occasion. The attendants silently listened to the quivering notes of their favourite instrument, as they rent the atmosphere, and re-echoed from the surrounding hills. The inhabitants in the remote parts of the district were thus warned by these doleful and protracted peals, floating on the air, that a fellow-creature was about to be consigned to the kindred dust; and all instantly ceased from any labour at which they might have been engaged. It was reckoned a sort of stigma on the memory of the deceased, unless the funeral had been attended by at least one piper. In fact, the rank of the deceased was designated by the number of pipers attending the remains to their last resting-place. The celebrated Flora Macdonald died on the 5th March 1790, and her remains were interred in the churchyard of Kilmuir, Isle of Skye. No fewer than 3000 individuals of every rank and class attended the funeral, at which fourteen pipers simultaneously played the "Corranach."

The "Gatherings" or "Cruinneachadh" were rapidly played "Piobaireachds," by which the clans were summoned to battle, and were inspired with a heroic spirit in the hour of danger and strife. The "Cruinneachadh" was considered very important, in fact, indispen-

sable; and every clan had its "Cruinneachadh" or "Gathering Piobaireachd," as distinctly as it had its "cath-dath" or "tartan," or its "Gairm-catha," its "slogan or war-cry." Hence, "Cruinneachadh Chloinn Ghriogair," the "MacGregor's Gathering;" "Cruinneach Chloinn Fhionnlaith"—"The Farquharson's Gathering." The "Gathering of the Clans" is a fine "Piobaireachd," said to have been composed during the battle of Inverlochy in 1427, when the Royal forces were vanquished by Donald Balloch of the Isles, to which hero the well-known "Piobaireachd" (now modernized for the pianoforte), named "Piobaireachd Dhonuill Duibh," was composed about the same time.

The Salutes, Laments, and Gatherings are said to have been at times composed to words, and words to have been composed at other times to them. At all events, every Clan Gathering, Lament, &c., generally had its particular poetical verses, framed in a suitable manner to rehearse the bravery, or to lament the demise of any particular feudal lord or chieftain. For example, M'Leod's Lament, or "Cumhachd Mhic Leoid," is a beautiful and pathetic poem lamenting that he will never return—

"Cha till, cha till, cha till mi tuilleadh,
Cha till MacLeoid, 's cha bheo M'Cruimein," &c.

To the plaintive air of this Lament Sir Walter Scott composed very appropriate stanzas, being a translation of the ancient Gaelic verses.

Of old the Highlanders believed that their pipers could actually communicate all requisite tidings, by making the instrument almost to speak the same as if by words. There are several traditions of parties having been rescued from danger and death by the distant warning notes of the "Piob Mhoir." In this there is nothing incredible to any who know the surprising execution with which pipers of skill can handle their chanter's.

To the air of "Fàilte Phrionnsa" already alluded to, the far-famed Rob Donn, the Burns of the North, composed his beautiful piece of "Iosabel Nic Aoidh," a poem diverging into variations to suit the "Piobaireachd." In the same manner M'Intyre composed his matchless "Bendouran," to a pipe air. Although such poetry has come down from age to age, and will still be found in the Hebrides, and in other parts of the Highlands, yet I am not aware that it has ever been collected and published, with the exception of some mutilated fragments in collections of Gaelic poetry. We have, to be sure, the words and airs of what are called "The M'Gregors' Gathering," "The Camerons' Gathering," &c., but these are quite modern, and have not the most distant resemblance to the ancient music and words of those Gatherings. The poetry of the M'Gregors' Gathering, viz.—

"The moon's on the lake
And the mist's on the brae," &c.,

is the composition of Sir Walter Scott, and the music that of Lee, if I remember well, and it has not the most remote resemblance to the very stirring and spirited old "Piobaireachd" of the M'Gregors' Gathering.

As to the antiquity of pipe music and poetry, this is no place to speak; but one thing is certain, that ever since there have been "Clans" or "Fìneachan," they have had their characteristic "Piobaireachds" and poems. The origin of the bagpipe appears to be involved in considerable mystery, but at all events it must be very remote. It is believed that this instrument was in use among the ancient Greeks and Romans, and some are of opinion that it was introduced by the latter into this kingdom. It is remarkable, however, that the great Highland bagpipe may be said to be peculiar to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and likewise to be the only real national instrument any where.

It is very surprising with what rigid correctness the ancient Piobaireachds had been composed, in regard to bars, divisions, and variations. For example, such men as the M'Crimmons, who have

Odds and Ends.

THE MASSACRE OF THE MACPHERSON.

[From the "Bon Gaultier Ballads,"]

Fhairshon swore a fend
Against the clan M'Favish;
Marched into their laud
To murder and to rask;
For he did resolve
To extirpate the vipers,
With four and-twenty men
And five-and-thirty pipers.

But when he had gone
Half way down Strath Canaan,
Of his fighting tail
Just three were remainin' ;
They were all he had,
To back him in ta battle ;
All the rest had gone
Off, to drive ta cattle

"Ferry coot!" cried Fhairshon,
"So my clan disgraced is;
Lads, we'll need to fight
Before we touch the peasties,
Here's Mhic-Mac-Methusaleh;
Coming wi' his fassals,
Gi'lies seventy-three,
And sixty Dhuinewassails!"

"Coot tay to you, sir;
Are you not ta Fhairshon?
Was you coming here
To fust any person?
You are a plackguard, sir!
It is now six hundred
Coot long years, and more,
Since my glen was plunder'd."

"Fat is that you say?
Dare you cock your peaver?
I will teach you, sir,
Fat is coot behaviour!
You shall not exist
For another day more;
I will shoot you, sir,
Or stap you with my claymore!"

"I am fery glad,
To learn what you mention,
Since I can prevent
Any such intention."
So Mhic-Mac-Methusaleh
Gave some warlike howls,
Trew his skian-dhu,
An' stuck it in his powels.

In this fery way
Tied ta fallant Fhairshon,
Who was always thought
A superior person.
Fhairshon had a son,
Who married Noah's daughter,
And nearly spoiled ta Flood,
By trinking up ta water:

Which he would have done,
I at least believe it,
Had ta mixture been
Only half Glenlivet.
This is all my tale.
Sirs, I hope 'ts new t' ye!
Here's your fery good healths,
An' tamn ta whiskey duty!

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"Cha till,
Cha till."

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communicate all reference to the North British was
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To the air of "Maxton, Kincardine, of L450,
famed Rob Donn, 1 piece of "Iosabeil 353, and which was paid off in
suit the "Piobaireachd" from Miss Rodgers, now of
his matchless "Beau I paid L67 10s of interest on
has come down from brides, and in other I paid her £60 of interest since then,
it has ever been coht. Miss Rodger's loan was in
mutilated fragment sure, the words and ing, "The Camera
and have not the n words of those Gargot from the Rev. Mr Henderson,
ing, viz.—

"T I have paid £100 of the principal,
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is the composition: ear 1856 and 1859. I have paid
I remember well, t on bills during these years. The
very stirring and Gathering

As to the antiqu is about seven per cent. I got
speak; but one ttext of £1500 in 1859, and
"Clans" or "Fh charged were £105. In 1860
"Piobaireachds" were about £2000, and I
be involved in com thereon L140. In 1861 my dis-
remote. It is bell t L3000, and the monay for these
ancient Greeks and the highest rate I paid I think was
roduced by the lat per cent., but this was only for a
that the great Hilt the rate of interest was high. I
Highlands and Is national instrument
It is very surpris policies on my life. One of L2000
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been the family pipers of the M'Leods of Dunvegan from time immemorial, and the M'Arthurs, pipers to the M'Donalds, Lords of the Isles, the M'Kays of Gairloch, now represented by her Majesty's excellent piper Angus M'Kay, the Macgregors of Fortingal, the Ranks of Coll, the M'Intyres of Rannoch, &c., all composed their Laments, Salutes, and Gatherings with as much artistic precision and correctness as though they should have been the productions of a Beethoven, a Mozart, or a Jullien. This is the more surprising as these celebrated pipers and composers knew nothing in olden time of noting music. The M'Crimmons, indeed, and others committed their music to paper by vocables instead of notes, and in that way preserved several of their beautiful Piobaireachds to this day. The notes were known by certain syllables, which, by being grouped into vocables, otherwise of no meaning, conveyed a knowledge of musical clauses and bars. As an example of this ancient but simple mode of recording pipe music, a small portion of "Piobaireachd Dhonuill Ghruamaich," "Donald Gruamaich" of the Isles Salute, may be given as follows :—

"Urlar," or Air.

- I. himbotrao hiodro, hodroradin hiodin ;
 hindo botriea, hiedirieo, hadiriea hiodro,
 hobodrao hiodiriea, himbodrocin hiodin ;
 hindo bodria, hiediriea, hadiriea hiodro.
 &c., &c., &c.

Variation 1st.

- I. hindi, hievi, hovi, hovi, hovi, hovi, hiodin ;
 hindi, hievi, hievi, hievi, havi, havi, hiodin ;
 hindo, hindo, hindo, hindi, heive, havi, hiodin ;
 hindi, hievi, hievi, hievi, havi, havi, hiodin.
 &c., &c., &c.

Variation 5th,

- I. hindatri, hadatri, hodatri, hodatri, hodatri,
 hodatri, hodatri, hiodin.
 hindatri, hidatri, hiedatri, hiedatri, hodatri,
 hiedatri, hodatri, hiodin.
 &c., &c., &c.

It is very remarkable, speaking of the Highlanders and of their music in general, how nature has inspired them with such skill and power in the modulation of their beautiful and plaintive strains, that their music appears as if composed by connoisseurs in the science.

While singing their beautiful songs and airs (of which they have an immense variety, and from which many of modern airs are borrowed,) they observe flats and sharps with much precision, while they know not that such at all exist by name, and they very frequently change their tunes, when in the act of singing, from major to minor keys, and *vice versa*. In almost all their labours they use appropriate songs to enliven the work, and these songs are chanted by many voices at once. When furling or waulking cloths,—when rowing their boats, or reaping their fields, these songs correspond in time to the movements of their hands. The work is thus regulated, and the various voices are blended together in such complete unison and harmony, that a stranger would greatly relish the same, and could not fail to admire such purely characteristic features of a primitive but loyal people. The late severe destitution of food has done more to annihilate these distinctive peculiarities in the manners and customs of this hardy and virtuous people than have the changes and effects of the previous half century.

It need hardly be remarked that the martial strains of the Highlands (many of which are collected and published for the pipe and



piano by M'Donald and M'Kay), have been frequently designated as harsh and uncouth, and altogether unworthy of the name of music. Be this as it may, it is music dear to every true Highlander, and on this account it should be remembered that its effect in arousing the feelings, and in exciting to valorous deeds in the hour of danger, has been inconceivably great. There is not a battle which has been honourable to Britain, either on the banks of the Ganges, Indus, or Sutledge, or in the Peninsular campaigns, or in Egypt, or anywhere else, in which this powerful instrument has not cheered the gallant Highlanders to do their duty! It were as well to stigmatize the Swiss for their national "Ranz de vaches," and other congenial airs, as the worthy natives of our Highland mountains and glens for their martial gatherings and other characteristic music! Whatever is national, whether melodies, or anything else, the same is very naturally appreciated by the natives; and it were vain on the part of strangers to depreciate what they are naturally unqualified to judge of, or to undervalue in public estimation that against which they are determinately prejudiced.—I remain, &c.,

ALEX. MACGREGOR.

